

Rt Hon Priti Patel MP

Home Secretary
2 Marsham Street
London SW1P 4DF

26 August 2020

Dear Home Secretary

We are writing to raise our severe concerns about an approach which has been made from the Counter Terrorism HQ of the Metropolitan Police, on behalf of your department, to organisations working to end violence against women and girls (VAWG). The request is to invite VAWG organisations to join a '*collaborative approach to research and solution scoping*' on the issue of '*links between suspects of domestic abuse and extreme views, which can manifest into terrorism*'. It has been stated that evidence of these links has been presented '*by a variety of sources*', which have not been provided.

We want to make clear that as a movement who have worked to end VAWG over five decades we completely reject this agenda and decline the invitation to collaborate with this work, for a number of key reasons which we outline in this letter. We hope these concerns will be reflected on and this agenda will not be pursued to ensure such research does not fuel further racism and enact harm.

Ending violence towards women is urgent and there are many areas of research which we would recommend the government focuses on. However we are extremely concerned about the types of 'links' this research seeks to identify, the likely framing of these 'links', and who will be targeted in the action these 'links' will supposedly justify. We understand gender-based violence as a cause and consequence of women's inequality, underpinned by patriarchy in our society and deeply ingrained norms and expectations for women and men. It is rife within all societies, and evident across social, ethnic, age, class and racial stratifications within all communities. One has to question an approach which seeks to look at 'causality' or risk within small proportions of the population, and ask who will be targeted and why. In light of the history of the Prevent agenda and the Home Office's hostile environment, we believe this research proposal is highly problematic.

It is clear that this area of work is not located in a theoretical exploration of connections between violence, patriarchy and extremism (on both the far and religious right), it is located within the state's 'counter extremism' agenda, which we contest for its impact on civil liberties, targeted surveillance and criminalisation of certain communities, and for fuelling prejudice and racism in our communities. It will lead to the targeting of specific communities who are already subjected to racism and other discrimination, and who already exist on the margins as a result of structural inequality.

As we are sure you are aware, Prevent has been severely criticised for its weak evidence base, which is driven by flawed theoretical assumptions about the process of radicalisation. Focus on religious ideology – rather than social, economic and political factors – as the driving force behind terrorism is severely problematic and has reinforced prejudices towards Islam in recent years. Prevent has led to the rise in surveillance of entire communities, 'over policing' and a securitised state, and the growth of fear, hatred and racism towards Muslims and Islam. Prevent has had direct consequences for the women we support; specialist

services led 'by and for' Black and minoritised women have clearly documented the fear and barriers that women face when reporting abuse and seeking help due to surveillance, the criminalisation of their communities and the hostile environment.

Women's safety and experiences of VAWG have long been used as a means to justify racist action. This narrative has a long colonial and neo-colonial history, in which marginalised communities are framed as 'backwards' or a greater threat to women as a means of justifying violence and state intervention, whilst those with the power to frame the narrative remain unchallenged, and the root causes of violence against women remain skewed. We clearly see this racialised approach in the framing of both terrorist acts and violence against women in the current public domain. A white supremacist who commits a terrorist act is almost always portrayed as a lone-actor with mental health issues, and the 'white community' are not held to account for his behavior, whilst the same cannot be said for Islamic extremists and the 'Muslim community'. Similarly, despite the vast majority of those who abuse and exploit young girls in the UK being white, 'white culture' is never called to account in the perpetration this type of abuse, whilst ethnicity and culture was the primary focus of much of the media coverage of a number of high profile grooming gangs in towns such as Rotherham. Attributing race and ethnicity as a 'cause' is not only racist, it enables the state to mask the social and economic factors, power imbalances and structural inequality which we know drive VAWG.

We further reject attempts to give Prevent legitimacy by expressing it in the language of 'safeguarding'. Safeguarding should be based on the principles of protecting children and other vulnerable people from harm, but Prevent sees individuals as a source of harm. As the UN Special Rapporteur on Racism has made clear the widespread enforcement of the flawed Prevent duty by teachers, professors, doctors and other professionals has had 'horrific consequences'. Staff within VAWG services have reported that they have been required to undertake Prevent training as a condition of receiving funding from statutory agencies. We strongly oppose requirements on VAWG's services to cooperate in Prevent. In addition to the fact that statutory agencies are requiring independent women's services to engage in state surveillance, such requirements hold women and women's services responsible for preventing extremism in the same way that they are already held accountable for their own abuse and the impact of it on the lives of children.

There remains no evidence that Prevent actually prevents extremism but there is clear evidence of the severe harm it has caused. We cannot participate in work which is located within, or associated with, this reactionary government agenda.

Finally, we wish to note that the government's wider counter terrorism strategy, particularly 'cohesion' and 'integration' approaches, which have placed responsibility on minority communities and also led to significant changes in the funding of community development and empowerment work within Black and minoritised communities. These changes have directly impacted Black and minoritised women experiencing VAWG, as they helped to create a context where established specialist women's services face cuts or closure at the same time as other organisations – including faith based organisations – which directly contribute to state objectives of counter terrorism and compliance with 'British values' receive funding. More recently, the Casey review into integration resulted in deeply negative stereotyping of Muslim women, and reinforced barriers for marginalized women by framing fluency in English as a means of accessing support. The agenda of counter terrorism has undermined, rather than enabled, support for women experiencing VAWG and other forms of inequality in recent years. We cannot accept a suggestion that it could now serve to prevent harm.

We hope you will take the concerns set out in this letter seriously and close this programme of work immediately. This is a matter of urgency and we therefore request an immediate response to acknowledge our concerns and to confirm that this work will end. We are also very happy to meet or to provide any further information or clarification should this be helpful. We invite you to contact Lucy Hadley at Women's Aid Federation of England (l.hadley@womensaid.org.uk) with any further questions or to arrange a meeting.

Yours sincerely,

Nicki Norman, Acting Chief Executive, Women's Aid Federation of England

Baljit Banga, Executive Director, Imkaan

Sarah Green, Director, End Violence Against Women Coalition

Estelle du Boulay, Director, Rights of Women

Sara Kirkpatrick, Chief Executive, Welsh Women's Aid

Medina Johnson, Chief Executive, IRISi

Gisela Valle, Director, Latin American Women's Rights Service

Shani Lee, Co-ordinator, London VAWG Consortium

Huda Jawad, Co-Founder, Faith and VAWG Coalition

Gudrun Burnet, CEO, Standing Together Against Domestic Violence

Donna Covey CBE, Chief Executive, AVA (Against Violence and Abuse)

Souad Talsi MBE, Founder, Al-hasaniya Moroccan Women Centre

Shaminder Ubhi, Director, Ashiana Network

Nicola Lambe, Chief Executive, Ashiana Sheffield

Firoza Mohmed, CEO, and Maira Butt, Chair of Trustees, Humraaz

Khaldha Manzoor, Centre Project Manager, Rochdale Women's Welfare Association

Harriet Wistrich, Director, Centre for Women's Justice

Niki Scordi, Chief Executive, Advance

Michelle Blunsom, MBE, Chief Executive Officer, East Surrey Domestic Abuse Service

Fiona Dwyer, CEO, Solace Women's Aid

Ruth Bashall, CEO, Stay Safe East (Supporting disabled survivors)

Becky Rogerson, Chief Executive, Wearside Women in Need

Professor Marianne Hester, Chair in Gender, Violence & International Policy, Head of the Centre for Gender and Violence Research at the School for Policy Studies, University of Bristol.

Dr Emma Williamson, Reader in Gender Based Violence, Centre for Gender and Violence Research at the School for Policy Studies, University of Bristol

Professor Nicky Stanley, Professor of Social Work, Co-Director, Connect Centre for International Research on Interpersonal Violence and Harm, University of Central Lancashire

Professor Nicole Westmarland, Professor of Criminology, Department of Sociology, Director of the Durham Centre for Research into Violence and Abuse, Durham University

Dr Geetanjali Gangoli, Department of Sociology, Durham Centre for Research into Violence and Abuse, Durham University

Professor Khatidja Chantler, Professor of Gender, Equalities and Communities, Manchester Metropolitan University

Professor Aisha K. Gill, Ph.D. CBE, Professor of Criminology, University of Roehampton

Dr Ravi Thiara, Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Warwick

Professor Anitha Sundari, Professor of Gender, Violence and Work, College of Social Science, University of Lincoln

Professor Erica Burman, Professor of Education, Manchester Institute of Education, School of Environment, Education and Development, The University of Manchester